DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 810 HE 021 672

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TITLE Making Mistakes: Error and Learning in the College Presidency.
INSTITUTION Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Evaluation; Administrator Role; College Administration; *College Presidents; Higher Education; Learning Processes; Misconceptions; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Work Experience
IDENTIFIERS Error Reports

ABSTRACT

The self-reported errors of college and university presidents are examined and analyzed from the perspective of organizational learning. Very little is known about how presidents take on their roles, identify and assume their responsibilities, and learn about their workplaces or the difficulties they face and the mistakes they make in doing so. Study methodology consisted of intensive, semi-structured interviews with college and university presidents in a purposive sample of 32 institutions distributed nationally. The four error clusters described by presidents are listed as: errors of omission ("I should have done something"); substantive errors of commission ("what I did was wrong"); process of errors of commission ("how I did it was wrong"); and errors of commission--action errors ("I should have refrained"). A comparative analysis of these error clusters looks at patterns of difference and patterns of similarity. Factors that account for presidential error and the learning that occurs as a result are explained. The four conclusions resulting from this study are as follows: college presidents are prone to err; most presidents see themselves as making their worst errors as novices; the possession of interpretive skills appears to be related to the ability to recognize retrospectively that one has made mistakes; and errors help presidents learn a significant amount about their own relationships with others and about the relationships that bind others in organizations. Three appendices offer statistics on: level of presidential experience at time of error; presidential error by initial presidential strategy; and presidential error by presidential strategy at time of interview. Contains 31 references. Tables are included. (SM)

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MAKING MISTAKES:
ERROR AND LEARNING IN THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

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Making Mistakes:
Error and Learning in the College Presidency

The literature on the college and university presidency focuses on presidential roles (e.g., Benezet, et al, 1981; Cote, 1985; Cohen and March, 1986), presidential tasks and responsibilities (e.g., Berendzen, 1986; Kauffman, 1980; Vaughan, 1986), and the social and organizational contexts in which college presidents work (e.g., Kerr, 1984; Kerr and Gade, 1986). However, we know very little about how presidents take on their roles, identify and assume their responsibilities, and learn about their work places (see Dill, 1984), and, with few exceptions (Birnbaum, 1987), we know even less about the difficulties they face and the mistakes they make in doing so.

This paper examines the self-reported errors of college and university presidents and analyzes them from the perspective of "organizational learning." To say that a certain action was a mistake is to have some idea, retrospectively, of what the correct action should have been (Feldman, 1986). An instance of learning or insight is implied. It is conceivable that presidential re-interpretation of a past action as a mistake (Weick, 1979), along with insights about how such a mistake might be corrected or avoided, could lead to revised understanding of the presidential role. This study considers whether college presidents experience error of this kind. The following questions guided the research: Do college presidents typically see themselves as making mistakes? What kinds of mistakes do they report? How and why do presidents appear to make these errors? What do they learn from them, and what is the nature of that learning? When during their terms do presidents make what they see as their "biggest mistakes," and what may account for presidential error-- and for its recognition?

Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from intensive, semi-structured interviews with college and university presidents in a purposive sample (Selltiz, et al, 1976) of 32 institutions, distributed nationally (8 each of major research/doctoral granting universities, state colleges, independent colleges, and community colleges). The sample was equally divided between old presidents (in office for five or more years) and new presidents (in office for less

than three years), and 6 of the 32 presidents were conducting their second or third presidency.[1] The primary data for this paper consisted of responses to an open-ended interview question asking a president to describe his or her single biggest mistake; related and contextual data from the total interview record were also included.

Initial reviews revealed a two-part structure in the presidents' responses to the "biggest mistake" question. Respondents tended to describe first what they did, and to follow with statements of regret about why their behavior was wrong, or what behavior would have been preferred. Initial analyses along these two structural factors (action/regret) yielded the first traces of an emerging framework (omission-commission) which was elaborated on the basis of more detailed patterns of consistency and contrast in the data.

In the second stage, the primary clusters generated by the framework were examined individually for patterns of internal consistency (i.e., for a common "story-line," common conditions and events). Cluster definition was sharpened through comparative analysis of the four clusters on five dimensions that emerged as key differentiators: focus of mistake, why an error was made (state of knowledge), how an error was made (acting on knowledge), content of learning, and nature of learning. This search for patterns of consistency and contrast, through methods of constant comparison, at progressive levels of abstraction, resembles methods of qualitative analysis described by Schatzman and Strauss (1973).

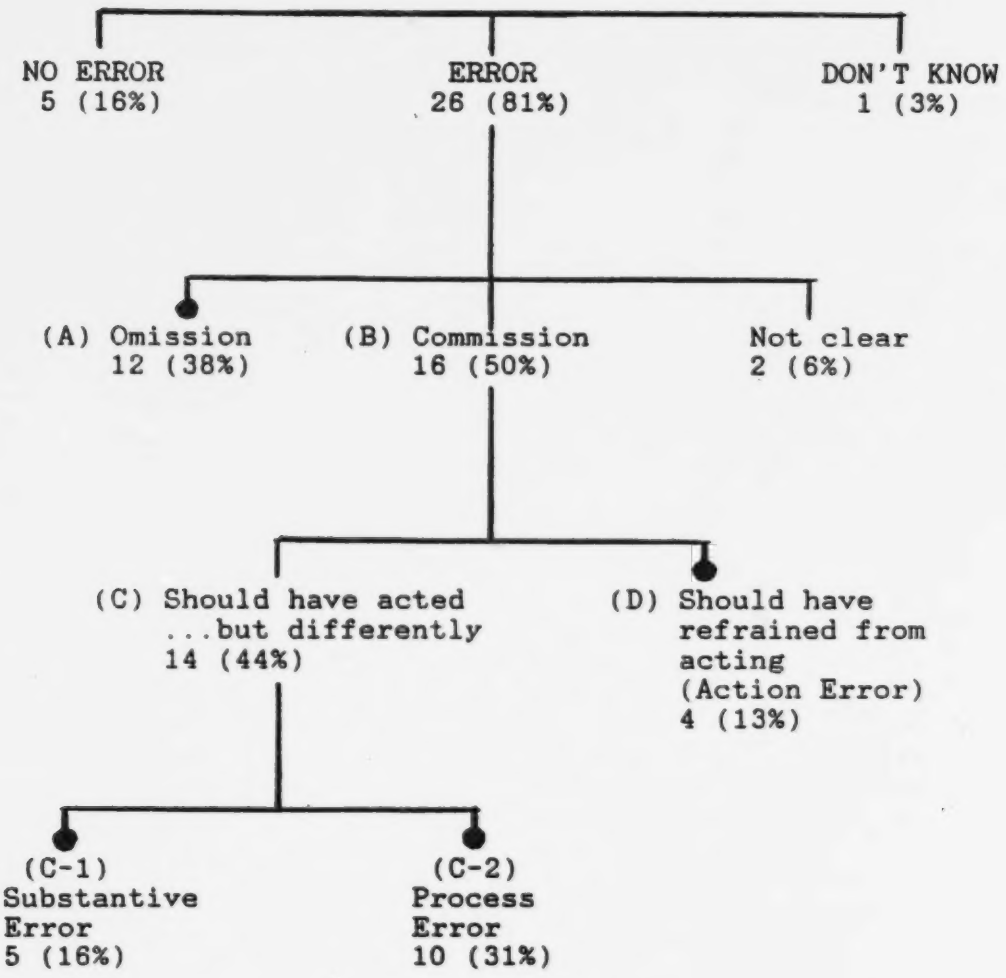
In the final stage of analysis, the data that had generated the framework were analyzed, by cluster, on relevant selector variables (presidential experience) and on key conceptual variables emerging from prior analyses (strategy) of the Institutional Leadership Project (ILP).

Results

When asked to describe their "biggest mistake," most college presidents are able to identify past errors, and what they learned from them. Figure 1 shows that 26 of the 32 presidents (81%) in the study's sample admitted to such error. Five (16%) reported no major error during their term of office, and only one, a new president, said that he did not know if he had made any mistakes yet.[2]

FIGURE 1

A Typology of Presidents' Self-Reported Errors



Key: ● Designates a primary error cluster or error type.

Note: Each n and percentage indicate proportion of the sample's presidents (base of 32) represented at each notch or endpoint of the tree above.[3]

These presidents err in different ways and over different matters. Figure 1 shows that presidents tend to describe their mistakes as "errors of omission" (A) or "errors of commission" (B). A president who errs by omission (A) may say in retrospect, "I did not take action, but I should have." A president who errs by commission (B) may make one of two statements: "I took a certain action, but I should have acted differently" (C), or "I took action, but I should have left it alone-- I should have refrained from any kind of action" (D). The president who believes that it was, in fact, appropriate to take action but that he should have acted differently (C) may assert further that his was an <u>error of substance</u>: "I did the wrong thing; I should have done something completely different" (C-1). Or he may admit to an <u>error of process</u>: "<u>What</u> I did was right; <u>how</u> I did it was not" (C-2).

Presidential errors tend to cluster at one of four endpoints of the branches in Figure 1. These four <u>primary clusters</u> represent <u>error types</u>, or different ways in which presidents may conceive of their biggest mistakes: errors of omission (A), errors of commission with a substantive focus (C-1), errors of commission with a process focus (C-2), and errors of taking any kind of action at all (D)[4]. Figure 1 suggests that errors of omission (A) and process errors (C-2) may occur (or be recognized) more frequently than substantive or action errors (C-1, D). 38% of the sample reported errors of omission (A) and 31% reported process errors (C-2), compared to 16% reporting substantive errors (C-1) and 13% with action errors (D).

The Four Error Clusters: A Description

<u>Errors of Omission</u>: <u>"I should have done something" (A)</u>

Presidents with errors of omission-- the most frequently reported type-- neglect to do something that, only later, they know they should have done:

> [My biggest mistake was] not firing the vice president for business the day that I walked in the door.
>
> I didn't press on the need for building a new [building]. I left it up to the vice president for student services, and he dropped the ball.

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The problem that dominates this cluster is the president's difficulty in building or maintaining a good working relationship with someone important to him-- a chief business officer, a chief academic officer, an athletic director, another member of the president's immediate staff, trustees, a system or state chancellor. In virtually each case, the president, in speaking of his mistake, focused on his one-to-one relationship or interaction with another key college leader, and his regret typically took one of three forms:

-- I should have fired.

-- I should have cut away at dead wood and brought in new blood.

-- I should have taken a stronger, more assertive position in pursuing what I wanted, or bringing in the right person.

This kind of error can trigger powerful events that encroach on the president's time as he becomes immersed in repairing damages:

> I let the [administrator] stay, it came back to haunt me. He allowed me to undergo some transactions that were contrary to...policies ...flagrant violations.

Looking back, several of these presidents blame their critical omissions -- or failures to act -- on their own "naivete"; or they say they did not know the cues, or "smoke signals," of a hidden problem, or that they were "too ignorant to realize they were not getting good advice."

<u>Substantive Errors of Commission</u>:
<u>"What I did was wrong" (C-1)</u>

Presidents with the relatively rare substantive mistake bring knowledge derived from their past administrative or leadership experiences to their new circumstances with the expectation that they will achieve familiar results. They discover, however, that an approach that worked in a different place or time does not apply now-- that they can not achieve what they thought possible, or that new problems result from their actions. For example, one president tried to placate his faculty,

who were upset by his appointment, by offering to modify his search procedures for other senior administrators. His previous experiences with a different type of organization led him to believe that this approach would end faculty complaints directed against him, but to his surprise, it did not. He did not achieve the effect he expected, and in retrospect, he regretted modifying the search procedures for other administrators because it created new problems.

These presidents respond to their errors by trying to correct unexpected results. This is possible in some cases (e.g., replace a vice president, move the college planner to a different office); in others, it is not, and the president can only regret a mistake with which he must live.

Process Errors of Commission:
"How I did it was wrong" (C-2)

Presidents committing the relatively common process error describe themselves as being substantively right, but as failing to consider the powerful effects of the "how" of what they have done. They tend to express one of three regrets:

-- My timing was off: I went too fast...I picked the wrong time.

-- My intensity was inappropriate: I should have done less...I should have done more.

-- I did not adequately explain what I would do and why it was important...I did not convince important people to "buy in."

One of the presidents in this cluster captured these regrets in a single generalization of his experiences:

> The generic mistake is two-fold. First, sometimes I go too fast before the crew is ready to move along. The second mistake is that sometimes I assume people know more than they do.

Others were more explicit:

> [From my mistake I learned to] make sure that the... board of trustees... is really with us before starting program reduction. Work with

them on a one-to-one basis to achieve this.

The setting for half these presidents' stories is "hard times." Budgetary shortfalls call for belt-tightening or cutbacks, and the target is the academic division. The most common error involves a president who focuses hard on the cuts themselves (substance), but does not consider how others understand and experience his actions (process). Speaking retrospectively, he depicts the faculty as objects of administrative imposition, and he usually reports a backlash, frequently dramatic--threats to his job, loss of friendships, feelings of intense discomfort or severe pain:

> ...it was painful-- for the institution and for myself. I realized from that experience that when you make decisions, it is real people with families that are involved...you need to know it is people who are affected.

These presidents are discovering the human side of "the organization" -- that it exists, that it can impede or derail their plans, that it requires attention and care.

Errors of Commission, Action Errors:
"I should have refrained" (D)

The few presidents with action errors seem caught in diverse tensions: between being entrepreneurial and being rational or practical; between succumbing to the enticement of new resources, and attending to an internal sense for what is meaningful, important, and enough; and between attending to literal and construed meaning. For example, one president pictured himself as swept away by "a lot of momentum" to establish an expensive academic program that had to be closed within a few years, while another talked about allowing himself to pursue a grant on a time line that forced him to compromise what he really wanted for the college. Another president said bluntly about the first two years of his presidency, "I would have tried to do less things, but I felt an urgency." In another case, a president described how his attempt to correct the facts in a report on a personnel action was interpreted as an infringement of the faculty's "freedom of speech, freedom of press."

In each case, the president seemed to assume initially that he could channel events to his advantage--that he could keep an expensive program alive, prevent an externally funded program from distorting his own plans

for the college, intervene in the faculty's interpretation of a personnel action. He learns, however, that certain events can push even a president around, distorting his personal intentions, and that in such cases, it is best simply to leave things alone-- to refrain from answering to pressures, annoyances, or enticements.

The Four Error Clusters: A Comparative Analysis

Patterns of Difference

Table 1 shows that the four error clusters, or types, differ along several key dimensions. First, they differ according to the focus of the mistake. Presidents who err by omission (A) generally fail to mold satisfactory working relationships with vice presidents, trustees, or other key leaders. However, presidents with substantive and process errors (C-1 and C-2) are concerned about relating to larger, more amorphous collectivities-- usually the faculty or college as a whole. Presidents with process errors appear to make mistakes as a consequence of financial difficulty.

Second, the four clusters show differences in why error occurs and in how it is manifest. Presidents with errors of omission (A) seem initially inattentive to the domains of their errors. They do not anticipate their problems, which surface as surprises, and, therefore, their responses are delayed. In contrast, presidents with substantive errors (C-1) have clear expectations, derived from past experience, about what to look for and how to act in a particular domain. They take familiar action but find that their old rules do not apply well in the new setting. Presidents with process errors (C-2) appear to have incomplete expectations, about how to take action. In retrospect, they continue to see their mistaken action as substantively correct (i.e., they did the right thing for their particular contexts), but they regret their approach, with most saying they had neglected to garner the acceptance, support, and understanding of important actors. Presidents with action errors (D) seem to overestimate their personal effect. Their expectations are unrealistic, and in retrospect, they point to ineffectual actions.

Third, the clusters reflect differences in what college presidents learn from their mistakes. From the first error cluster (A, omission), presidents gain appreciation for competent and compatible leadership

TABLE 1

A Comparative Analysis of the Four Error Clusters

	Type of Error:			
	Omission	Commission		
	(A)	Substance (C-1)	Process (C-2)	Action (D)
1. Error Focus, Relationship Between:	President and key leader	President and faculty or college	President and faculty, finances	--
2. Why Error Occurs, Expectation:	Unclear, none	Faulty	Incomplete	Over-expectation
How Error Manifests, Response:	Delayed	Inappropriate	Incomplete	Ineffectual
3. Content of Learning	Appreciate competent, compatible work partners	Sense situational differences, choose responses that fit	Appreciate what people know, understand, feel	Respect limitations, learn to say "no"
4. Nature of Learning	Build up: create, discover new knowledge	Reconstruct: eliminate, replace faulty knowledge	Build up: elaborate existing knowledge	Reconstruct: identify, resist misleading knowledge
5. Summary, Learning Tasks	Setting up	Discovering by trying out	Learning what it takes to make change	Learning limits

associates-- or, at least, they learn to terminate harmful working relationships. From the second cluster (C-1, substance), presidents learn how to sense situational differences that call for diverse (and new) responses; they begin to identify new behaviors that work in their new settings-- or at least, they identify and filter out behaviors they thought would work, but which do not. The third error cluster (C-2, process) teaches that people matter-- that organizational members' knowledge, beliefs, and feelings can influence, if not determine what a president can accomplish. The typical president with this error learns that a substantive focus is insufficient-- that, in the words of one president, "You can't move faster than you can bring people along." The fourth cluster (D, action errors) teaches perspective-- a respect for personal and organizational limitations, and adherence to them in the conduct of the presidency.

Fourth, for each cluster, the nature of learning varies. Presidents who err by omission (A) and presidents with process errors (C-2) learn by building up their knowledge. In the former cluster (A), they discover and create new knowledge for themselves, and in the latter (C-2), they elaborate knowledge that they already possess. In contrast, presidents with substantive errors (C-1) and action errors (D) are engaged in shedding or reconstructing inaccurate knowledge. In the former cluster (C-1), they eliminate and replace faulty knowledge; in the latter (D), they identify and resist misleading knowledge.

In summary, these clusters reflect four presidential learning tasks that may be achieved through error, observation, and reflection: (1) setting up a reliable leadership core, (2) discovering this job and this place by trying them out, (3) learning what it takes to make change, and (4) learning about limits.

Patterns of Similarity

The error clusters resemble each other in three ways: They are set in the earliest stage of the presidency; they emphasize relationships; they assume negative feedback loops to the president.

Timing. The mistakes that presidents define as their biggest occur largely during the earliest stage of their terms. Of the 16 old presidents in the sample, 9 (56%) reported their errors as occurring during their earliest years in office (usually the first three years); only 3 (19%) reported errors late in their presidencies (others

did not indicate time of error). Of the 16 new presidents in the sample,[5] 13 (81%) were able to describe a major error in their early years.

Relationships. In all but the last cluster, the focus of errors is the relationship between the president and an individual, or the president and a collectivity (e.g., the faculty, the college). In some cases, the focus may be on the president as a threat to the relationship of others (C-2, process errors). Common themes include: failure to connect in the first place, failure to work together effectively, failure to communicate and understand, and failure to respect existent relationships.

Negative feedback. Regardless of type of error, presidents realize they have made mistakes when they actively register negative feedback. For example, they may be surprised by festering but unattended problems, or they may realize that they cannot achieve their goals, that their plans have misfired, or that their expectations are unrealistic. This kind of negative feedback may lead a president to develop new knowledge, elaborate what he already knows, or replace inapplicable or unrealistic assumptions with knowledge that fits his new role or setting.

Accounting for Error and Learning

What factors may account for presidential error? And what factors may account for the learning that occurs from them? The presidents' self-reports suggest several possibilities.[6]

Errors of omission (A). Inexperience is likely to account for presidents neglecting to set up reliable one-to-one working relationships. Of the 12 presidents (both old and new) with errors of omission, 10 (83%) were just beginning first presidencies when they made their errors (see Appendix, Table A). It is also possible that these errors occurred because presidents were giving more attention to external resource issues than to the building of good working partnerships. In a prior study, Neumann (1987) differentiated the initial strategies of the sample's presidents based on a three-part strategy model developed by Chaffee (1984, 1985). A secondary analysis of those data (summarized in Table B of Appendix) reveals that 7 of the 12 presidents with errors of omission (58%) were using "adaptive" strategy (e.g., fundraising, recruiting students, etc.). A third possibility is that

the presidents had not yet developed the interpretive orientation that would direct them to develop good working partnerships (acquired through experience on the job, see Neumann, 1987); only 3 of the 12 presidents (25%) were using interpretive strategy at the time of their errors (see Appendix, Table B).

Process errors (C-2). The commission of process errors may be related to initial over-reliance on linear strategy. Of the 10 presidents with process errors, 8 reported errors that occurred early in their terms, and of the 8, 6 (75%) relied on linear strategy. However, a president's ability to see retrospectively that he committed a process error of a certain type (taking action too quickly before other key actors are ready) may be related to long experience in office and to interpretive skill. Of the 10 presidents reporting process errors, 8 said they acted too quickly or intensively. Of these 8, 6 (75%) were experienced (i.e., had been in office for five or more years, or were initiating second presidencies), and 5 (63%) were using interpretive strategy.

Action errors (D). Inexperience seems to account for this kind of error. The 4 presidents in this cluster reported errors that occurred during their earliest days in office (see Appendix, Table A). Also, the ability to understand retrospectively that one has committed this type of error may be related to interpretive skill; 3 of the 4 presidents (75%) reporting this error were using interpretive strategy at the time of the interviews (see Appendix, Table C).

Being error-prone and error-free. The tendency to see oneself as an error-prone and learning individual appears to be strongly related to having an interpretive orientation-- a characteristic associated with experience in office (see Neumann, 1987) and with retrospective recognition of the process error of acting too quickly (see above). In this study, 7 presidents (22% of the sample) indicated that their errors were continuous-- that they tended to repeat certain errors (e.g., "a tendency to shoot off my mouth"), or that they were prone to make many different errors. Of these 7, 6 (86%) were using interpretive strategy at the time of the interview, 5 (71%) were experienced, and 5 (71%) reported the process error of moving too fast before others understood the president's action.

In contrast, the tendency to see oneself as error-free appears to be related to the absence of interpretive strategy (especially internally directed). The 6 presidents (19%) who reported no error (5 with none, one who did not know; 3 old, 3 new) used only linear or

adaptive strategies early in their terms; none used interpretive (see Appendix, Table B). At the time of the interview, only 2 of these 6 were using interpretive strategy, both of whom were directing it outwardly (e.g., toward alumni, the state, etc.) rather than internally (e.g., toward the faculty or college community) (see Appendix, Table C).

Conclusions and Discussion

This study reaches four conclusions:

1. College presidents are prone to err. Most presidents can identify a critical mistake they have made during their terms, and the most experienced among them admit a tendency toward frequent error. In all cases, these presidents recognize their errors through negative feedback cycling back to the president as his "error" takes effect. Furthermore, presidents appear to be engaged in learning as a result of their mistakes, and that learning may involve building up knowledge (learning something new and unexpected, elaborating on what they already know), or shedding and replacing false or inappropriate knowledge (weeding out or resisting faulty or misleading knowledge). Learning that involves building up (error types A and C-2) may occur more frequently than learning that requires elimination or reconstruction (C-1 and D) (see Figure 1).

2. Most presidents see themselves as making their worst errors as novices-- at the beginning of their terms, and especially, just as they initiated their first presidency. What remains unclear about this pattern is whether only new presidents make significant mistakes, or whether experienced presidents tend to recognize only the error of their early days. Furthermore, since presidents appear to learn from their early errors, this pattern also raises the question of whether presidential learning also stops after the earliest years in office-- and along with learning, growth.

3. The possession of interpretive skills appears to be related to the ability to recognize retrospectively that one has made mistakes-- especially mistakes requiring complex understanding of human cognition (process errors, C-2) and organizational processes (action errors, D). Also, the absence of an interpretive orientation may be

related to actually making some mistakes (e.g., A, omission).

4. Errors help presidents learn a significant amount about their own relationships with others, and about the relationships that bind others in organizations. At the most fundamental level, they come to value their own working relationships with other key college leaders (through errors of omission, A). At more complex levels, they gain sensitivity to larger collectivities, and to the relationships embedded within them. This is especially true of the learning that results from process errors (C-2), but also from several substantive and action errors (C-1 and D).

Recent studies in cognitive psychology and higher education have established propositions that can be used to interpret these findings. Studies of cognitive development, for example, have established the primacy of knowledge structures, or schemas, that may manifest themselves as "preconceptions" or "expectations" that guide perception and action (see Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Gioia and Sims, 1986; Lord and Foti, 1986; Isenberg, 1986). In higher education, Gilley, Fulmer, and Reithlingshoefer (1986) have referred to a schema-like "parallel perspective" -- a "highly developed conceptual framework," developed through previous experience, that guides some new presidents in "moving their new institution[s] forward" (p. 14). Parallel perspective is an example of a particularly effective schematic structure.

Although schemas promote efficient comprehension and behavior (Fiske and Kinder, 1981; Isenberg, 1986), they may be limited or flawed. For example, a schema may be inaccurate for intrinsic reasons, or because conditions have shifted so that it no longer applies, or because it is incomplete. Also, as in the case of a person who is unfamiliar with a certain subject, a schema may be entirely absent (being "aschematic" for a particular domain of knowledge). (See Crocker, et al, 1984; Fiske and Kinder, 1981; Isenberg, 1986; Markus, 1977). In each of these situations, both perception and behavior will be conditioned by the flawed or missing knowledge. In this study, the college presidents' erroneous behaviors may have been conditioned by missing knowledge, or by flawed or limited preconceptions of this type.

Schemas, or deep beliefs (accurate or flawed), are extremely resistant to change (see Birnbaum, 1987; Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Lord and Foti, 1986). However, change

can occur if a person encounters plentiful, clear, and particularly meaningful information that contrasts with a long-established schema (Feldman, 1986; Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Schon, 1983; Rothbart, 1981). An encounter of this type represents realization that can lead to learning. Realization of a flawed schema entails registering that "something is wrong"-- for example, realizing that a familiar action is producing a different effect, or discerning an annoying surprise. Learning entails correcting the schema that was registered as "wrong," or increasing awareness of and sensitivity to a flawed schema. In retrospect, the old and flawed schema may be seen as wrongful thinking, and the behavior on which it was based may be called "a mistake."

The learning that follows this kind of encounter may involve two kinds of schematic change. First, a new schema may be adopted where none existed before (as in an error of omission, A), or a limited schema may be further elaborated (as in a process error, C-2). Or second, an existent, flawed schema may be invalidated or re-shaped (as in substantive errors, C-1, or action errors, D), and if its elimination is difficult (because of habit or custom), at least a watchfulness for the perceptual and behavioral "mistakes" it engenders may be adopted. (See Crocker, et al, 1984 and Markus, 1977 for discussion of schema change) This study suggests that the first kind of learning (building up knowledge) is more common than the second (reconstructing knowledge) for college presidents-- that they are more likely to learn if no preconceptions exist, than if false ones do exist. It also points out that presidents are erring and learning human beings, and that what is true of error and learning in general life, is true, as well, in the college presidency.

This study also raises the question of whether the learning that characterizes the early presidential years dissipates with time. A recent study, also based on ILP data, has established that new presidents are actively engaged in "getting to know" their new contexts and roles (Bensimon, 1987). The current study suggests that once presidents pass the critical "take-charge" years, they may lessen in this urge to discover-- they may believe that they know as much as is necessary to know. This hypothesis is supported by recent findings in cognitive development: "Experts" (akin to experienced college presidents) have been found to possess more schemas, and more comprehensive and complex schemas, and to use these with more ease, than novices (Fiske and Kinder, 1981; Fiske and Taylor, 1984). Thus, experienced college presidents would, in fact, know a great deal more-- and

would be able to use their knowledge more expertly-- than inexperienced presidents. At the same time, however, this kind of knowledge accumulation and elaboration has been found to lead to a resistance to learn further; the well-established schemas of the expert tend to resist the questioning and re-shaping that characterizes the more limited and malleable schemas of the novice (Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Markus, 1977; Crocker, et al, 1984). Thus, experienced presidents may be better "knowers," but new presidents may be better "learners."

Several practical conclusions result for strengthening the presidency. First, new presidents may require guidance in where to focus their attention-- on what to know and look for (e.g., how to know when current working partnerships are not working, how to choose effective leadership partners, how to assess personal and organizational limitations). Second, experienced presidents may require guidance in maintaining an openness and ability to continue learning. For new presidents, standard seminars, books, and mentoring may work. Experienced presidents might benefit more from interacting and working with others who see the organizational world differently, and who can raise questions about assumed truths (other presidents who are peers, carefully selected and rotated leadership associates, new presidents). In either case, leadership development programs should center on presidents' actual experiences; they should provide opportunities and support for learning activities that require both the building up and reconstruction of knowledge; and they should focus on developing interpretive skills to assure the kind of reflection that seems to make error recognition, and learning, possible.

The issue of relationship is a recurring theme in presidents' learning. For example, it is significant that the majority of presidents in this study referred to errors that fall in a human and relational domain, rather than in a more inanimate policy, structural, or task domain. This focus underscores recent assertions that the study of human cognition and social life has neglected a fundamental paradigm that considers how individuals build or limit their relationships with each other-- how they mediate the tension between separation and connection (see especially Gilligan, 1982; also Belenky, et al, 1986, and Keller, 1985). The study of the college presidency may be no exception to this finding (see Dill, 1984). In particular, the current study's identification of interpretive strategy (an orientation that emphasizes "shared understanding"-- the defining characteristic of "relationship") as critical to the learning that results

from error emphasizes further the prominence of a relationship theme. Through experience, presidents seem to learn to give attention to relational issues.

In defense of error. In explaining how people come to know the effects and value of what they do, Karl Weick (1979) says:

> You'll seldom know what you've been up to until it's too late, until the words have already been uttered or the action is already finished .... All understanding originates in reflection and looking backward. (p. 194)

At times, looking back this way leads us to evaluate our past deeds as good or successful; at other times, we may see only neutral or inconsequential results; and at yet other times, we may recognize wrong-doing and error. The third realization is usually the most difficult, but from Weick's perspective, it is as valid as the first two. Its importance lies in the learning and change that it can stimulate: If what we did in the past was wrong, what can we learn from it, and how can we act for the better in the future? Viewed this way, receptiveness to error reflects an openness to larger-- although at times uncomfortable or even painful-- understanding. What we get, in return for the discomfort and pain, is simply the opportunity to try to do better next time. Considered this way, error in the college presidency-- like error in life-- can be accepted, studied, even valued.

APPENDIX

Table A

Level of Presidential Experience at Time of Error

Presidents with error type:	At time of error, president was: Inexperienced	Experienced	Total
A (Omission)	10 (83%)	1 (8%)	12 (100%)
C-1 (Substance)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	5 (100%)
C-2 (Process)	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)
D (Action)	4 (100%)	0	4 (100%)

Notes:

Inexperienced: New president (in office for less than 3 years) initiating a first presidency.

Experienced: Old president (in office for five years or more), or new president within the first three years of a second or third presidency.

Some presidents were not classified within this scheme because level of experience at time of error could not be determined.

Some presidents listed errors of multiple type and were classified once for each type (cluster) represented (see Figure 1). One president's error could not be classified due to insufficient data; usable data were available for 31 presidents.

APPENDIX

Table B

Presidential Error by Initial Presidential Strategy

	Initial presidential strategy:				
	None	Linear	Adaptive	Interp.	Total
Presidents with error type:					
None or Don't Know	0	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	0	6 (100%)
A (Omission)	2 (17%)	5 (42%)	7 (58%)	3 (25%)	12 (100%)
C-1 (Substance)	0	3 (60%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
C-2 (Process)	0	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)
D (Action)	0	2 (50%)	0	2 (50%)	4 (100%)
Total Sample	2 (6%)	16 (50%)	13 (41%)	11 (34%)	32 (100%)

Notes:

Many presidents used two strategies in combination and were classified for each.

Some presidents listed errors of multiple type and were classified once for each type (cluster) represented (see Figure 1). One president's error could not be classified due to insufficient data. Usable data were available for 31 presidents.

APPENDIX

Table C

Presidential Error by
Presidential Strategy at Time of Interview

	Strategy at time of interview:		
	Interpretive	Other	Total
Presidents with error type:			
None or Don't Know	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	6 (100%)
A (Omission)	7 (58%)	5 (42%)	12 (100%)
C-1 (Substance)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5 (100%)
C-2 (Process)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	10 (100%)
D (Action)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)
Total Sample	18 (56%)	14 (44%)	32 (100%)

Notes:

A number of presidents used interpretive strategy in combination with another strategy ("other" classification), and were classified for each.

Some presidents listed errors of multiple type and were classified once for each type (cluster) represented (see Figure 1). One president's error could not be classified due to insufficient data. Usable data were available for 31 presidents.

NOTES

1. For the purpose of this study, "experienced" presidents include old presidents (in office for five or more years), and new presidents (in office for less than three years) who were starting a second or third term at the time of the interviews.

2. To comply with pledges of confidentiality, all sample institutions are presented as "colleges" (and occasionally "institutions"), and all presidents are referred to with the masculine pronoun. Specific position names have also been changed to reflect the generic role. For example, a person holding the title, "Provost," or "Academic Dean," (designating chief academic officer) would be called, "academic vice president." A "Vice President for Finance" would be called, "vice president for business."

3. A president was counted once at each notch or endpoint reflecting his error(s) (regardless of number of errors that he may have per notch or endpoint). For example, a president reporting 2 process errors would be classified once at each of the following points: C-2, C, B, and ERROR. A president reporting one process error and one substantive error would be classified once at each of the following: C-2, C-1, C, B, and ERROR.

The range of discrete errors per president was 0-6.

Errors tended toward single classification, except where a single error was composed of two parts that were classified variously.

4. Error type D (taking any kind of action at all) is abbreviated to "action error" in this paper.

5. These 16 new presidents include both first-time presidents (new and inexperienced), and individuals initiating second or third presidencies (new but experienced). This analysis considered only the effects of presidential stage, not cumulative experience in the presidential office.

6. Incomplete and limited data preclude analysis of errors of substance (C-1).

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